

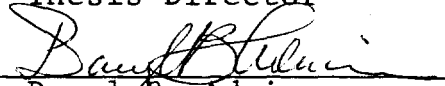
The Great Gatsby
The Death of a Man and His Nation

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Daryl B. Adrian", is written over a horizontal line.

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The Great Gatsby: The Death of a *Man* and His Nation

"Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds"

-William Shakespeare

The Great Gatsby is considered by many to be F. Scott Fitzgerald's finest novel and by some, to be the American novel of greatest import. A sordid tale of men, women, adultery and foremost, money, Gatsby cannot be confined simply as the manifestation of Fitzgerald's obsession with wealth and the wealthy. Nor can it be parochially classified as a book about the Roaring Twenties. It is, in essence, a classic story of death--the death of the American dream.

Seldom does the life of an author play such a large role in a work, as Fitzgerald does in The Great Gatsby. Hence, it is essential that one know something of Fitzgerald's life. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born (in 1896) in St. Paul, Minnesota to middle class parents. Influenced heavily by Middle Western awe at money, power and urbanity, F. Scott grew to persistently believe in the dramatically innate difference between the average American and the very rich. In the fall of 1913, Fitzgerald began his academic career at Princeton. No longer was he to view the rich from afar, but was now interacting amongst them. The Jazz Age had come for the young Fitzgerald with nights and days of extravagant spending, recklessness and frivolity which have come to be considered typical of the Roaring Twenties. In these formative years, Fitzgerald's fascination with the supremely elite rich grew. Yet, this undying

fascination and struggle for acceptance was colored by the destruction materialism had, in fact, created.

In 1920, Fitzgerald married Zelda Sayers, an Alabama debutante who Fitzgerald described as "belong[ing] to a different world" (Turnbull 105) than himself. Though their marriage was an unhappy one, Zelda serves as a model for many female Fitzgerald characters. She, like Daisy, lived a life of beautiful performances, blind to the moral emptiness of the wealthy society that had borne her. She was the golden girl, the Southern belle, Fitzgerald's key into the ultimate bourgeois society; a society or hierarchy of wealth which could never truly accept Fitzgerald, solely because of his birthright.

Yet, Fitzgerald was talented and that talent brought him the kind of money he had been seeking. His first novel, This Side of Paradise, allowed him to enter into the world of literary fame and financial fortune. Predictably, Fitzgerald fell into the Jazz Age arena of extravagant spending and drinking which would eventually bring him to his death.

In 1925, The Great Gatsby was published. For the most part, the novel was not well received by literary critics and scholars of its time. Moreover, until fairly recently, Gatsby held a position of relative obscurity. Yet, over the past fifty years, the novel has been increasingly recognized as a masterpiece, addressing the condition of humanity more directly than any other twentieth-century novel. Unfortunately,

— shortly before his death in 1940, Fitzgerald had the degrading experience of walking into a large bookstore only to find none of his books in stock. His name had been forgotten, erased from American minds with the close of the Jazz Age he was so well known for.

— Originally, Fitzgerald intended for his short story "Absolution" to be the opening chapter of The Great Gatsby. In accordance with this, "Absolution" gives the reader some insight into the elusive and mysterious Jay Gatsby's childhood as well as Fitzgerald's own. The story commences one Saturday afternoon when ten-year-old Rudolph Miller impulsively lies to his priest, Father Schwartz, during confession. Asked if he has ever "told any lies", Rudolph instinctively and convincingly answers with a resounding "no." He walks home, relishing in his brilliantly executed performance. Yet, shortly, Rudolph realizes the seriousness of his offense- by lying to the priest he has nullified the subsequent act of absolution. The act which had been so pleasing to him (lying) could be extremely displeasing to God.

— Initially, Rudolph attempts to blame the lie on his imaginary cohort, or psychologically termed as his alter-ego, Blatchford Sarnemington. The regal Blatchford is the antithesis of all the boy has and is. While Rudolph is son to drab, uneducated, Middle western parents, Blatchford is the embodiment of incurable romanticism, rising above the mundane obligations of

life, and left only to be obligated to his imagination. Yet, Rudolph knows that it is he who is responsible for the lie. He seeks out Father Schwartz and confesses all.

Unexpectedly, the priest does not absolve Rudolph. He, too, is caught up in romantic whirlwind, longing for a fuller, more "glimmering", life. He dismisses Rudolph's lie, even justifying the boy's actions. Rudolph now knows that all the threats made to him by God, priests and his parents are lies. The only real world exists apart from these entities. The only real world is that of the exciting Blatchford. Blatchford's world is the world of Jay Gatsby as Rudolph's is that of Jay Gatz. His trust in God and his heritage (parents) has vanished. He can now only pursue the Blatchford dream- the American dream of glittery gold and power.

Accepting Rudolph Miller as the younger Jay Gatsby, allows one to understand the mysterious man, his beliefs and his actions. In "Absolution", Rudolph confesses that he is indeed guilty of pride, believing himself to be "too good to be the son of [his] parents". Likewise, after Gatsby's death, the reader learns that he is not, in fact, the "son of some wealthy people," but the son of a poor, uneducated, Minnesota man. And yet, the reader can understand that Gatsby has not "lied" about his past. He has merely provided a fanciful, Blatchford embellishment-- a reality in this dreamlike world of romanticism. Congruently, Gatsby's "formality of speech," which Nick finds to be just short of "absurd,"

can be seen as typical of the lie he is living, or perhaps trying to live up to. Sadly enough, financial wealth cannot bring to Gatsby the heritage he so wants. He is but one member of the "newly rich" society; he loves not Daisy, but the idea of Daisy, Daisy and her casual snobbery inherently demanded from birth. She and her way of life can only be seen as typical of the Blatchford dream, the "dead dream," where money and the inevitable class struggle is surmountable- the American dream. Yet, Fitzgerald's Gatsby shows America the death of this dream. This Utopian vision, brought overseas by our founding fathers, has fallen victim to the destructive forces of materialism. It is only the "Gatsbies" of the world who still envision and furthermore, believe in this wondrous promise found only in the past. It is the oppressive rich who have thwarted the American dream-- Gatsby's dream and furthermore, Fitzgerald's dream.

The looming eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, perhaps the most profound symbol within The Great Gatsby, are witness to the oppression of the poor by the rich while they gaze, knowingly, over the valley of ashes. The billboard's "persistent stare" watches over the land, indifferently acknowledging the travesties of human existence. Rather than acting as a symbolic God, Eckleburg plays the role of Fitzgerald's anti-God. Within his sight is only the death of the down-trodden poor and the corruption of the rich. Similarly, "Absolution" portrays the death of God; He is but a

feeble lie concocted by humanity. Eckleburg is not capable of making moral judgments. Though his eyes see all, he is blind and indifferent. He offers no promises and therefore He breaks none, contrary to Rudolph's God. God, so he had been told, was a Being of punishment (for sins) and reward (for good deeds). And yet, Rudolph is not punished for his lie. He is, in essence, contradictingly rewarded for his sin by Father Schwartz, a church representative of God. Predictably then, God is seen as but a fallacy of the human psyche. Moreover, Eckleburg, as a type of anti-God, remains unmoved by the devastation He observes. He offers no rewards nor does He inflict any punishment.

Through the narrating voice of Nick, the reader learns of George Wilson's discovery of his wife's infidelity. Wheeling Myrtle over to the window facing the luminous billboard, George presents her and her sin before God. Crying "'God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!'", Wilson and his wife stand before the anti-God, Eckleburg, who does indeed "know" but simply does not care. Myrtle's adulterous sin will not be punished, as Rudolph's was not, by the indifference of Eckleburg. Her death is not the result of a vengeful God's wrath, but of wealth's recklessness. The same eyes that have seen death, adultery and oppression within the "gray land" stand by, stoically impartial.

Certainly, one can easily view Dr. Eckleburg as being symbolic of the bleak Fitzgerald anti-God and

hence, the major symbol of the novel. Yet, Gatsby presents many more symbols of the unattainable American dream of wealth, power and prestige- a fruitless and even ridiculously sad dream. This dream, which ails the nation, consumes Jay Gatsby. Seemingly, he is the illegitimate child of wealth.

Jay Gatz was poor. Daisy was not. Jay Gatz strived for the dream, the dream Daisy embodied. Climbing from poverty to the wealth of his "colossal" West Egg mansion, Jay Gatz had become the millionaire Jay Gatsby (the adult Blatchford). Yet, this enormous class leap was motivated by only one thing- the acquisition of Daisy: the mansion, the brightly colored suits and cars, the parties- all neatly obtained with the hope of gaining the love of Daisy and her society.

A green light flashes incessantly from across the Sound in plain view of the Gatsby mansion, bought specifically for that view, the view which harbors the Buchanan light. This light is central to Gatsby's dream and thus, to The Great Gatsby. Symbolic of the unattainable American dream, the green light flashes from East Egg, where "people played polo and were rich together", into West Egg, the "less fashionable of the two". Notably, the Gatsby mansion is located in West Egg, not East. Once again, Gatsby, and those of the nouveau riche society, are not completely encompassed into the elite circle of old money. The distinguishing border of which birthrights have created can never be crossed by the less fortunate. Through the cold eyes of

'aristocratic' wealth, poverty can not be overcome, even through financial prowess. Gatsby, and his kind, shall always be inferior. West Egg is home to the extremely wealthy but its social status will never exceed that of East Egg's.

Indeed the social discrimination described, or eluded to, in The Great Gatsby is almost of a racial nature. Moreover, the specific type of discrimination is that of the Aryans. Typically, Aryans are thought of as being of Nordic decendency, showing physically recessive gene characteristics (i.e. Blond hair and blue eyes) and, of most importance, strong (as evident in Social-Darwinism). Ironically, Tom Buchanan fits the Aryan mold. Though Tom is modeled after an Aryan, Fitzgerald wrote his novel in 1925, long before Hitler's rise to power. Therefore, one can assume that Fitzgerald simply classified the Buchanans according to social status, not really considering race as a factor.

Yet, Tom with his "straw" colored hair and "cruel body" is the exemplary Aryan. His views support the Aryan doctrine by believing himself to be a member of the "dominant race". Furthermore, embracing this dogma, Tom divulges his belief that the "Nordics... make civilization- oh, science and art, and all that". Acceptance into this racially elite group can only be accomplished through birth (genetic makeup), strikingly similar to the social discrimination of the East Egg 'race'. Other races are, of course, seen as inferior, never to be accepted as equal. Their purpose is only to

serve the 'dominant race,' for they are by birth the weaker race.

Congruently, Tom's treatment of others appeases Aryan beliefs. Through his affair with Myrtle, Tom uses both Wilsons. Worthy enough to be Tom's mistress, Myrtle is not of the same blood or caliber. She is but a slave to Tom, benefiting him sexually yet undeserving of the name "Daisy". Her mention of the name is forcefully met with Tom's brutality. Myrtle is simply a servant to the 'higher' race though she is horribly misled in her belief that her social position can be transcended. She, like Gatsby, is forever bound to her subservient position.

Likewise, Gatsby will never escape Daisy nor his elusive dream of acceptance. She, too, is of a different 'race'. Perhaps the most vivid tragedy within the novel is Gatsby's undying belief in the American dream, the belief that Daisy is capable of loving him. Yet, she cannot, for Daisy is not capable of loving--her existence is one, simply, of materialism. She does not care about Jay Gatsby for she can only see Jay Gatz.

Neither of the Buchanans is, to say the least, morally righteous. The East has rewarded their cruelty. Furthermore, the Nation, founded on the ideal that all men are created equal is but a lie, as are the church and God. They are "careless people" who "smash up things and creatures and then retreat back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess

they had made..". Sadly, though, they are representative of the American dream, the dream that consumes many in an absurdist world. This is the dream made unattainable by social and racial discrimination. This is the dream that has made God no longer care. Finally, it is this dream that haunts the Nation and will, inevitably, be its ruin.

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The "Absolution" of Confessions

Rudolph told Father Schwartz all his sins--

"Cept one.

God would be oh so mad-- so very mad.

Father Schwartz had said so.

But as Rudolph walked home he noticed

No bolts of whitest fire chasing him through the night.

He loudly chanted "God-dammit, God-dammit, GOD-DAMMIT!"

(Right in God's ear)

Still nothing.

He scrunched and squinted and squished his face

And thought with all his might about

Old lady Swenson's knockers

Nothing!

Rudolph knew then.

He knew that everything and everyone was a lie--

His parents, God, everything.

--Heather Dean

April 8, 1991

Between East and West Egg

The Valley of Ashes is home to a dumping ground,
Where gray men crumble into bleak powder.
A small and foul river runs through the Valley and into
Grotesque burning gardens guarded by gray women.
Over the leaden land a swarming cloud of smoke suspends itself to
Form houses and gray cars, only to be blown away with one puff.
The sad eyes of Eckleburg look on knowing
That they see everything and nothing.

-- Heather Dean

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